# World Chronicle

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United Nations

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## 52nd NGO CONFERENCE

The 52nd Annual Non-Governmental Organization Conference, recently held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, focused on the impact of globalization on people around the world. This long-standing process has dramatically accelerated in recent years, driven by many forces, including new technologies and the increasingly free flow of capital. The dynamics of globalization are benefitting many people, generating unprecedented wealth, and creating new opportunities. But globalization is also having adverse consequences for many others, affecting human security, exacerbating economic and social marginalization and raising concerns regarding the persistence of extreme poverty. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Paul Hoeffel, Chief of the Non-Governmental Section of the United Nations, discusses some of the issues raised at the 52nd NGO Conference.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

For over fifty years, an annual Non-governmental Organization Conference has been organized by the United Nations in New York. It highlights the ways in which the United Nations and NGO partners can collaborate. This year's conference focused on key aspects of globalization including trade and finance, agriculture, labour, technology and communications, and building partnerships and new institutions. Over 2,700 NGO representatives from 60 countries were present.

Our guest today is Paul Hoeffel, Chief of the Non-Governmental Section of the United Nations' Department of Public Information. He will be interviewed by Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*.

Mr. Hoeffel, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

Mr. Hoeffel, perhaps you can tell us a bit about the relationship of the non-governmental organizations with the Department of Public Information. How did this thing develop? I mean, you have an impressive number of people at this conference from 60 countries. How are these people admitted to their relationship with the Organization and what – this is a long question – what is the advantages to them, and to the UN, of this relationship?

**HOEFFEL:** Well thank you for having me here. I believe that the NGOs that have been in association with my department, the Department of Public Information, this was something that was decided by the General Assembly at the very beginning of the United Nations that there would be this association with civil society. And over the years, from the beginning when the Charter was negotiated, NGOs were a very important part of the decision-making process of what the Charter would look like.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Because the Charter says "We, the peoples"?

**HOEFFEL:** Yes.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The NGOs, I suppose, would be appropriate examples of "We, the peoples"?

**HOEFFEL:** Yes. And over the years the relationship has evolved significantly and

the.number of NGOs, the number of non-governmental organizations that are working with the United Nations has grown considerably. This Conference that you just mentioned that we recently organized is an annual conference and, as you said, there were representatives from over 800 NGOs. There are 1,500 NGOs that are associated with my Department and there are another 1,500 that are associated with the Economic and Social Council. And they work in increasingly close partnership with the United Nations because the United Nations now recognizes that it needs the help of civil society, it needs the support, the moral support, and a very concrete programme support of the civil society organizations to carry out its work.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** What is the distinction between the NGOs who are in the Economic and Social Council relationship and those in relationship with you?

**HOEFFEL:** Those who are associated with ECOSOC, through ECOSOC, in consultative status actually have the opportunity to participate in intergovernmental body meetings of the Economic and Social Council, of its commissions or its subsidiary bodies, which means they can be invited to give their impression of legislation that is being considered. They can present information to the Council, to the United Nations and help actually elaborate on the legislation that is being considered. Those who are associated with the Department of Public Information have traditionally been those who have their own communications network, and they agreed in their association with us, that we will provide them with the information about the United Nations, about our work, explain what we're doing, and that they will pass this information along to their constituents. And so it's more of an informational relationship that they have with my Department.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Hoeffel, I wonder how these people are chosen? Looking at the list of participants in the conference, I see some wonderful names. Under the letter 'A' alone we have Apostles Revelation Society, Arise and Shine Association, Associated Country Women of the World and, perhaps a little more ordinary, American Sportscasters Association. Why do these people feel they need some kind of affiliation with the UN?

HOEFFEL: Well, it is a very diverse group of organizations and it's a very demanding – and sometimes even they would admit a difficult group of organizations. And the United Nations has made a special effort to really have a good working relationship with them and give them access to the information that we have and to the meetings that we organize. And, of course, they are from all over the world. There were organizations from

60 countries at the recent conference and many of them represent grassroots organizations – very, very local organizations – and, of course, this is the key role that we feel that the NGOs associated with my Department have, which is they are a very vital link to civil society, to the national and local community level people. And so yes, some of the names are very colourful but in general it means when they have associated with us that they are in touch with a lot of people that we would like to be in touch with.

**DEEN:** Mr. Hoeffel, the Secretary-General during the last couple of years, particularly the present Secretary-General, has called for increased participation by the NGOs in the UN system but there are many NGOs who complain – they are from developing countries – that they don't have the means to actively participate in the decision-making process. And if I remember right, some time last year the Secretary-General proposed a trust fund to get these NGOs, particularly NGOs from developing countries. What is the current status of this trust fund and who are these NGOs? Do they come mostly from rich countries or from the developing countries?

**HOEFFEL:** I think the answer to that last question is that most NGOs – because there is a tradition of NGOs, of non-governmental organizations, of the humanitarian assistance organizations, human rights organizations, of disarmament organizations – there is a tradition that these are generally based in the developed countries, in the industrialized countries. So that the predominance of NGOs are in the north and that is of great concern as clearly the needs of the UN is addressing and that the NGOs are concerned about are problems that exist in large part in developing regions. And so it's been very important to assist the development of NGO organizations in developing regions, in developing countries and also to be sure that their voices are heard here at Headquarters.

**DEEN:** Do you provide any funding for them to participate?.

**HOEFFEL:** In this conference, no, not at all. And yet many, many have come from developing countries and make their own sacrifice ..

**DEEN:** At their own expense?

**HOEFFEL:** At their own expense to come. However, for larger official meetings and for the world conferences efforts were made, not only by the United Nations but by the special agencies and funds to find monies to bring representatives to these very large meetings – the world conference series in early 1990s. And out of that grew the realization that more money was needed and I think that ECOSOC has been trying – the Economic and

Social Council -- has been trying to set up a trust fund and I'm not sure the status of it right now, how much money is available, but it is very necessary to ensure that representatives from developing countries participate as well. And probably the northern NGOs are more sensitive to this than ever they realize ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So anybody out there watching this programme should apply if they have an interest no matter where they're from? This programme is seen internationally so you'd welcome all applications?

**HOEFFEL:** Well, yes, but we do want people who are working in the areas that the United Nations are working on and hoping that they even have a relationship. Many of the NGOs of course have operations in the field, whether it's humanitarian assistance, development. And so they have relationships with many of the UN agencies that work in the field with the United Nations Development Programme, with UNICEF, with the High Commissioner for Refugees. There are hundreds of NGOs that work in the humanitarian assistance area and these are the people that we would like to be working very closely with.

**METZLER:** Well, the NGOs have been very active rhetorically and they have always offered a plethora of ideas. How seriously are these ideas taken here at Headquarters by the diplomatic community amongst the member states? It's often alleged by many diplomats that well, they don't really take NGOs that seriously unless they're constantly lobbied by them, which is often always the case. Maybe you could just explain that a little bit.

**HOEFFEL:** I think that one of the reasons that this last conferences was so successful and many conferences where we are bringing NGOs into the building, into the house and having very, very constructive and positive dialogue between them and member states and UN officials and trying really to find some common ground and, of course, that is what United Nations is all about. And so you have an effort to include them, to find the points where you can agree. It was very interesting, at one of the panels on trade and finance during the conference, the representative from the World Trade Organization acknowledged to them that they were just terrified of these NGOs because there is just such general hostility towards the corporate world and some of the larger international financial institutions. And yet when the panel began talking and a lot of heat was generated, a lot of light began to come out of it too, and a lot of common ground on issues came out. And so it's just the importance of the UN as a place where people get heard and really realized what are the

differences you have and whether they are reconcilable ....

**DEEN:** I find that you have a total of more than 3,000 NGOs – the Department of Public Information and Economic and Social Council – but some of them say that a good number of these NGOs certainly are not paragons of virtue, you know. There are fly-by-night operations. How do you make the distinction?

**HOEFFEL:** When we are reviewing the applications, and we do receive many of them, we have to really be very, very careful. We require a great deal of information about the NGO and we have our information centres – the UN Information Centres – in different countries also to give their opinion of them whether or not they have worked in programmes with them and that they have worked together and their reputation in general and also with other NGOs that we are aware of that we do work with and that we have great confidence in. And there are NGOs who have the problem, and they recognize it amongst themselves, that they are not often elected. They do feel so they speak for civil society but there are gaps sometimes and there certainly -- the Secretary-General at one of the conferences says "we are hoping for your sake, for your legitimacy, that you control the people that you are involved with and be sure that you are on the up and up."

**DEEN:** Is it true that there are also NGOs who are sponsored by governments?

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Before you answer that – this is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Paul Hoeffel, Chief of the Non-Governmental Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information.

**HOEFFEL:** That's another sensitive area that the NGOs are also concerned about. Once you are set up as an NGO and you start receiving funds or carrying out policies, they are of enormous assistance to the United Nations programmes in the field but also to governments in the field. And so if you have attention there as to whose orders are being carried out here, and whose monies are being used and who controls it and so there is concern among NGOs, particularly that they have to keep their operations very transparent and keep their relationship to the United Nations and to their governments very clear. Another problem is something that we review when they associate with us that they really, truly share the principles of the United Nations. After all, the United Nations has gone through 54 years now of really trying to lay out some best practices and some standards and principles of which everybody agrees we should operate in the world and in our participation at the local level. And so you have to have NGOs who agree with these principles, and if

they don't, then the United Nations cannot do business with them if they're not.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But surely, Mr. Hoeffel, you are not looking for only cheerleaders to the United Nations?

**HOEFFEL:** Absolutely not.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I mean you want a diversification of opinions surely?

**HOEFFEL:** Certainly. But in terms of an operation, humanitarian assistance operations, you need a certain amount of coordination and cooperation and agreement as to what the human rights parameters are and other considerations so that people are in sync when you're dealing with the governments and when you're dealing with the United Nations.

**METZLER:** When you're looking at this whole matter, a lot of the members in the NGO community now are saying, "let's write-off the debt in the year 2000 for the poorest of the poor countries." This idea has been going around for a long time from Canada and France. If the debt is written off wouldn't that really discourage further lending by countries to the poorest of the poor when it comes to the second round of lending? In other words, you write it off the first time. All very well and good the humanitarian gesture but then don't ever expect the proverbial loan again.

**HOEFFEL:** Yes. At the conference there was a panel on trade and finance and Kwesi Botchwei, former Finance Minister of Ghana, was on the panel – he's now at Harvard -- and he was asked this very question. And he said: "Look in reality, much of the debt has been written off in effect but that the issue is well if you write off the debt of a country that has embezzled the funds or misused the funds, then aren't you just paying the elites in those countries to get away with their corrupt ways." And he said, "That also is something that is evolving very quickly that that generation of leaders is very quickly disappearing, particularly in Africa, and that the funds have to be supplied. There are *de facto* forgiveness of debt in many cases and that it is something that has to be measured very carefully."

**METZLER:** But this is still something, I feel, that has not been totally addressed because as you mentioned very correctly, many of the NGOs do have an innate hostility towards business and towards banks and as a result of that still this churns around in the hulls. This concept is, you know, somehow getting even with banks and what have you.

**HOEFFEL:** I think that the situation of the debt is something that all of the NGOs – as you mentioned the millennium – is something that's caught on. The Secretary-General has recognized this as an important initiative to forgive debt in countries where perhaps half of

their income earnings are being used to pay off debts from earlier regimes.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Hoeffel, why did you choose globalization as the topic for this conference? Globalization has had somewhat mixed reviews in the UN. Did you want to air this on the basis of pros and con?. You spoke about the general hostility towards some elements in the private sector which John also mentioned, how did this thing come about?

**HOEFFEL:** Well, I think that everybody recognizes that globalization has many positive aspects to it and many NGOs recognize that just on say, for example, on the level of communications – and the Secretary-General mentioned it – the difference of this period of globalization that has been going on for centuries is the speed of it, how quickly it's happening. And on one hand you can have this instantaneous communications as we've seen say around East Timor where people are really aware of what's going on and can organize and respond much more quickly to these things because of the globalized and high speed communication. On the other hand, as the Secretary-General pointed out, globalization has hit many countries like a hurricane.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Very adversely.

**HOEFFEL:** Very adversely. And really threatens their social structures, their traditions, the language, the religions and that this is the underside of globalization that many NGOs are very concerned whether they wanted to address, and certainly the UN as well. The direction of globalization is perhaps inevitable as a product of forces somewhat beyond their control.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** You're going too fast perhaps?

**HOEFFEL:** It may be the speed but it also – there is a conviction in the UN also that you can moderate – the word manage is not allowed – but you can influence the direction of globalization and that the decision-making at the highest levels in the international financial institutions and the governments really has a tremendous impact on the direction of globalization. And the UN is very concerned that the direction be adjusted to ensure that there is globalization with a human face; that the human factor is really there; that it is not just a total question of financial flows and capital allocation. You want to have globalization that includes very, very specific guidelines along the lines of the environment, on agriculture, human rights; just how to integrate, again, the principles that have been elaborated by the United Nations over the years into policies so that people are really taken into consideration. You can have a major financial crisis, as we had in several countries over

the past five years, and the markets might recover very quickly but the devastation at the social level in terms of unemployment, etc., lasts a very, very long time. It creates a very unstable situation.

**DEEN:** Mr. Hoeffel, a former Secretary-General proposed – who stressed the importance of NGOs – proposed a special forum or an assembly on the lines of the General Assembly for NGOs in the UN system. What is your response to this proposal?

**HOEFFEL:** Can you repeat the question?

**DEEN:** What he said was, he said that there should be a special forum – a permanent forum – in the UN system, like the General Assembly, where the NGOs can meet. Like how the delegations meet in the Assembly. That's really the former Secretary-General, Boutros Ghali who proposed ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** An NGO assembly. An annual event.

**DEEN:** So that they meet on a permanent basis.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Sort of a people's assembly.

**DEEN:** Right. Exactly.

**HOEFFEL:** That is a controversial proposal among the NGOs themselves with differences around that and it's still something that is percolating but no decisions have taken place.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Probably a lot of governments won't be too crazy about that either?

**HOEFFEL:** But there are a number of meetings coming up over the next year, particularly during the millennium. There's a millennium forum for example that will be taking place next May which is a forum of non-governmental organizations.

**DEEN:** In New York?

**HOEFFEL:** Here at Headquarters, yes. And there are a series of hearings that are going on in different regions of the world to get the opinions and the input from NGOs, from civil society, to formulate a position in the millennium forum as to what the future of the UN should look like, how the UN should be reformed, reorganized for the next several decades. And I think that during the millennium assembly, which will be in September, the General Assembly ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This the one that is going to be attended by all the heads of state?

**HOEFFEL:** Yes, it will be a millennium summit of heads of states. They will take into consideration the proposals that the NGO forum presents and the Secretary-General has promised to take that very seriously.

**METZLER:** Mr. Hoeffel what would you say is the singular achievement of NGOs recently in the United Nations in the past ten years – a treaty specially or a particular achievement?

**HOEFFEL:** I think what has made the NGO community get so much attention recently is that they have been successful on several different levels. And if you just think of the landmines treaty that was put through in 1997, that was an initiative of NGOs, and it almost bypassed some of the intergovernmental organizations, certainly in the early stages of it. And people will realize that this is a very potent – a lot of energy went into that and it was unstoppable. And you came up with an international treaty of major significance. Similarly, I think that since the end of the Cold War you've had tremendous new attention on human rights and extending the human rights that have been defined over the years but also trying to give them real – give the legislation, give the laws, the treaties that exist – some real teeth and make them work, apply them and that is something that the NGOs have been a tremendous force behind. And, again, the issue of globalization, I think, as the Secretary-General said that globalization and the rise of NGOs in the recent years has almost been a parallel phenomenon and it feeds off itself. And so you have the movement for the University of Human Rights being given tremendous ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Hoeffel, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Paul Hoeffel, Chief of the Non-Governmental Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network.* I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**